

## THE BUILDER,

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## SIR ROBERT SMIRKE AND THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

The architectural reputation of Sir Robert Smirke and that of the British Museum are involved in one issue. So far as that gentleman and the structure have proceeded together hitherto, they have served pretty well as the reflex of each other, and no pen could better describe, or pencil portray, the architect, than that which applied itself to the analytical delineation of this the structure on which he has been so long employed. We must confess to never having felt any partial likings to the latter, and this would involve us in an admission of the like purport as regarded the gentleman himself; but when we examine into the merit or the value of the opinions we had formed, we find that much is not to be attached to it. We have walked through the British Museum, and around it, perhaps, in a ton critical and fastidious spirit, thinking more of what might have been done according to our own estimate of the resources in art and finance placed at Sir Robert's disposal, than of attaching the right value to what had already been done. We pictured to ourselves a design in which genius of another cast should have been employed, and overlooked, or lost sight of, the character of that genius which had really been exercised upon it,—for genius Sir Robert Smirke undoubtedly has. It may not be arduous and ambitious in the sphere of art, but it is steady and practical, and indulges in the substantial—it may not reside in the inventive, the creative, and the imaginative region; but it has a discreet inkling in that direction, while it restrains itself within bounds with an instinctive tact that preserves it from the commission of many blunders; it lies in the mean, and avoids the extremes—and this is a happy genius in these days, or in those for which Sir Robert mainly lived. Wo to the man who goes in advance of his day, or lags lazily behind it—this is not what Sir Robert Smirke has done, he has lived well up to it—and we may make a trinity of our types, the architect, the structure, and the age are well worthy of each other; all that was *respectable* in the latter has been *respectably* answered and responded to in the other two.

But now it appears that Sir Robert has lived over the period for which he was so well adapted and run into another; we wish him heartily many days and happy ones in it, and we wish him more, for we cannot be serious in wishing him happiness without we would have him adapt himself to the age into which he has run. Our contemporaries, and many critics who, in their junior days, saw nothing so fine, nothing so perfect as the Post-office, the College of Physicians, &c., have the "*new light*" shining under the shadow of their slouched-hats, and as it has been Sir Robert's fate in travel steadily on, over the period in which railroads and aerial machines have whirled them to and fro, they wish that his once crack and respectable "*turn-out*" could have a little steam "*put on*," and that the tail at least of his structure, or it may be its head, though it come the last, should exhibit some sign of that superior vitality, that livelier spirit which characterizes all that surrounds it; they

look upon it as a national legacy, this Museum edifice, and very naturally too; and since the old gentleman has been so long making his will, they wish that this codicil should make provision, or be no bar at least to their enjoying themselves in "*the mode*." We wish so too, so that the antiques be preserved, and we think they may be.

Various have been the suggestions and the speculations of our contemporaries, and through them we detect a lurking purpose that would suggest the employment of another architect, or the formation of a commission to control the present architect in the completion of his design, or rather his design for the completion. God forbid, we say, that there should be either! God forbid that any such indignity should be heaped on such a man! On the other hand, we would affectionately and reverently importune Sir Robert to give some mark of confidence in the work. We would have it cherish his memory when he is gone—we would have it cheer his day of abiding among us; but let him in return confide in it, let the intimacy be on equal terms, and the parting will be in correspondence with it.

There is another Sir Robert, and to the two we think this matter may be safely confided. Sir Robert Peel knows the talent and the "*turn of mind*" of the architect of his own mansion of Drayton Manor, and with a keen susceptibility in matters of art, knows how to respect it. Let an enlarged estimate of their responsibilities take possession of the minds of the two, and we have no fear of the result. But responsible they are. The public who pay for, and for whose use this structure is erected, have as much of a right to be satisfied in respect of the design, as Sir Robert Peel had in respect of that of Drayton Manor, and they are as good judges of it, when not led off on a "*false scent*," and when left to their own natural bias and reflections. They will not require too much, and Sir Robert Smirke can abundantly satisfy them.

## MASONS' BENEVOLENT INSTITUTION.

There is on body of men connected with the building arts for whom it is so much required that provision should be made against declining years and accidents as the masons, and we are much surprised that steps have not been long since taken to establish an institution with this view. Masons are more exposed to the vicissitudes that affect trade than any other of their brethren of the building craft. Employment for them is far from regular; the use of stone in building is in many instances merely occasional, and thus they are thrown upon the necessity of constant migrations, or *tramping* as it is termed, from place to place, having no fixed residence or workshop. Again, they are more exposed to the adverse influence of seasons. Bricklayers are much the same in this respect, but by no means so badly circumstanced. Bricklayers have jubbing and indoor work to fly to in the winter and wet seasons, but the mason has no such resource except in very limited instances. We once took occasion to compute the average period throughout one year in which a mason was enabled to work, taking all these drawbacks into account, and we found it not to exceed eight months, or at the most forty weeks out of the fifty-two. Now, very few of the sagacious and clever calculators whom we so constantly hear alluding to the high wages of mechanics, are found to take this into account. We shall hear them talking of a mason or a carpenter earning his 70l. to 80l. a year in

London, whereas, as we have shewn, the amount may be taken at from one-third to one fourth less in positive earnings, and a great deal in many instances to be deducted for expenses in travelling to and in search of work.

Occasionally, it is true, in the summer season a press of exertion is made, and "*long time*" encouraged, by which seven days a week is accomplished, but this is not all gain to the workman. It may be well enough in harvest periods of agricultural employment to fall upon the extra push of a week or two's gathering in, the excitement and stimulus, and the harvest home, rewarding the peasant's toil; but we are prepared to contend that the application for weeks together of the handicraftsman, from five in the morning to seven at night, has not and cannot have a beneficial influence, and more particularly in regard of stonemasons. Their work is of a laborious and, in many instances, of a drudging and monotonous character, and to be confined to it through the live-long summer season, roused from bed with the sun-rise, as it were, and falling upon it wearied at the sun-setting, is but poorly compensated for by the extra day's wages—indeed, we say it is not compensation; and those who know the habits it superinduces, not from any perversity in the character of the man, but in the very nature of things, can corroborate us; Youth spends its energies, and seeks counter-vailing enjoyments, animal strength is called into requisition, and sensual excitement follow. The passion of gain to some is stimulated, and seldom sustained; the hard earnings are free spendings, and altogether, we say it is no gain, it is a loss; therefore, for the purposes of our argument, we hold that little more than eight months of the year are secured to the mason; his 5s. wages in London dwindles down to 3s. 4d. or 3s. 6d., and his 4s. in the country to 2s. 8d., from which the relative abatement comes for travelling, tools, &c. But there are many things worse than all this—the uncertainty, the idle, or rather the unemployed season, the temptations of it and the rest aggravate what we have so feebly depicted, and not depicted fancifully, for the facts stand to prove it. The mason, therefore, has more need than most, if not all, of the building class, for the make-weight of institutions of a provident and hopeful character; he is liable, also, to serious accidents and illness, in heavy-lifting and exposure to wet and cold.

But, it will be asked, how is it that nothing of the kind has existed before? and why call for its establishment particularly now? We could answer the latter query by many reasons drawn from the peculiar circumstances of the present times as affecting labour, but we need not dwell upon them at present; and as to the first query, we have to answer, that it is not true that nothing of the kind has existed before. We see in the relics of the once vigorous and important institutions of this country, the trade companies, as, for instance, the Carpenters' Company and the Bricklayers', in London, what was done or thought necessary to be done in times past in reference to their respective crafts; but where do we find the Masons' Company? it will be asked. There is one word that will ring significantly in the ear by way of answer, though it be spoken in a whisper; but what a question! and who is not prepared to answer? The FREEMASONS—yes, the FREEMASONS were once the grand corporation and brotherhood that watched over the interests we would have provided for now; but they are gone or turned away to other ends and objects, and sixty